Lee Salter

Conflicting Forms of Use

The Potential of and Limits to the Use of the Internet as a Public Sphere

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By

Dr. Lee Salter

Glossary and Acronyms

Colonisation: A concept that describes the process through which the lifeworld and persons within it are subjected to the 'logic' of instrumental rationality exercised through the economic system and the state.

Discourse ethics: Habermas's set of rules through which legitimate discussions should take place. Discourses ethics provide a basis for legitimate decision-making. Habermas distinguishes between his 'discourse ethics', which include 'moral discourses', and 'ethical discourses', which are those that take place in relation to a particular lifeworld.

Forms of use: A concept used to describe how technologies develop in accord with certain uses. Dominant forms of use are those that correspond with the needs of dominant systems and institutions.

IANA: Internet Assigned Numbers Agency, the original agency charged with allocating the numbers that identify Internet computers.

ICANN: Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the agency that replaced IANA

IMC: Independent Media Centre

Internet: A term used to describe disparate but interoperable networks linked to each other through the TCP/IP protocol.

ISOC: Internet Society

Juridification: Habermas's concept that describes the expansion of particular forms of legal relations into various aspects of life. Can be used as an indices of colonisation.

Lifeworld: A concept used to describe the world-as-lived. Habermas develops the concept from Husserl to describe a background culture that acts as the basis for taken-for-granted assumptions.

Public sphere: On Habermas's analysis a concept that most basically refers to a dialogical realm in which citizens come together to rationally debate issues of mutual concern. Its developed form refers to a network for generating and exchanging information and points of view. Others have modified it to take account of systemic inequalities.

Refeudalisation: A concept used to describe the regressive transformation of the public sphere into a 'feudal' form, wherein it loses its dialogical form, allowing certain systemic actors to dominate the form and content of communication.

Rationalisation: A concept used to describe a number of processes of modernisation. Systemic rationalisation refers to the development of instrumental reason in bureaucratic form. Lifeworld rationalisation refers to the decline of arbitrary authority and mythological worldviews, and the increasing importance of dialogic reason as the basis of decision-making.

System/Lifeworld: A dichotomy used to describe different action-systems. 'Systems' – the most important of which are the economy and the administrative system or the state – tend to be almost 'hermetically sealed', nearly autopoietic, on Habermas's analysis. They tend to operate on the basis of their 'own' logic and are difficult to influence. They tend to be

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motivated by instrumental rationality, which is opposed to the lifeworld's communicative rationality.

TCP/IP: Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol

W3C: World Wide Web Consortium.

World Wide Web: An application through which the Internet is commonly used. An adaptation of hypertext.

Introduction and Methodology

This thesis concerns the application of the social and political theory of Jürgen Habermas to evaluate the different potentials of 'the Internet', with a specific emphasis on its relation to the 'public sphere'. Both the Internet and Habermas's work have become significant areas of intense study over the past thirty years. Where the Internet has become a pervasive part of everyday life in the West, Habermas's work has become a pervasive part of the academy, reaching into politics, law, media studies, linguistics, social work, nursing, education, finance and accounting and much more. Perhaps because of this conjuncture, and with the English-language publication of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Habermas's work has been used as a basis for many investigations into the 'effects' of the Internet on democracy. In particular, it has been used in speculating about the possibility of actualising the public sphere on the Internet. This thesis works within the broad parameters of this issue.

The concept of the public sphere has become a popular one in academic literature in a number of fields. Although this on its own merits enquiry, there are other motivations for focussing on the concept. First, 'the public', or 'publics', is a key component of a democratic society. If decisions are supposed to reflect a 'public will', then this latter must influence decision-making. It is through public spheres that such a public will can be generated and enacted. Such a conceptualisation has been central to democratic theory and practice from Ancient Greece (Arendt, 1958) through the Enlightenment to the present day. Democracies today can be evaluated, at least in part, by the degree to which they function on the basis of effective public spheres.

A premise of this thesis is that denser participatory deliberative democratic engagement is necessary to combat the neo-liberal turn that is emptying decision-making of democratic politics. In this sense, the importance of the public sphere lies in its communicative capacity, that is, in its capacity to facilitate communication on the basis of intersubjective

recognition between citizens *independently* of the economic system and the state, on the basis of which decisions can be made by citizens in public. The free flow of communication – a primary element of sociation – becomes central to what we can term 'communicative democracy'.

The second reason to unpack this concept is that it is too often understood as a simple ideal and thereby dismissed. Habermas's initial (1989) investigation into the public sphere, to which so many refer, is concerned with a historically specific phenomenon. So it is important to understand this concept under changed conditions – and the consequent changing *use* of the public sphere. This is to say that it is important not to abstract the concept from the political, social *and* economic context that constrains it. As Blaug puts it, 'what has been decontextualised [in theoretical development] must, if it is to be of use, be re-contextualised' (Blaug, 1997: 102).

Thirdly, although Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere and its context is to my mind a useful tool for understanding the limits to democratisation, there are still shortcomings – most notably in his (1996) construction of a theory in which the public sphere can overcome the contextual constraints on its operation. Accordingly, it is important to critically interrogate – and if need be reformulate – this theory before and during its application in an analysis of the Internet.

Blaug (1997) has pointed out that while there has been a massive amount written on Habermas's theories, there have been few considerate applications of it. According to Blaug, part of the difficulty lies in the fact that 'critical theory is not a scientific, empiricist-inductive set of laws which, once formulated, can be wheeled out to confront an epistemologically independent world' (Blaug, 1997: 101). Critical theory can be distinguished from positivistic social science in terms of its theory and its practice. In the first case critical theory does not rest with mere appearances, but aims to the reveal part-hidden underlying structures through which agency is constrained. In the second case, critical theory has

a normative underpinning – an orientation to emancipation from domination – and aims to make practical interventions on that basis. As Blaug puts it, Habermas's theory has 'practical intentions in the area of emancipatory politics' (Blaug, 1997: 107). So, any application of Habermas's critical theory requires a theoretical and conceptual engagement applied to and evaluated in relation to the social world but with normatively grounded practical intent.

Applications of Habermas theory have considered numerous sites of interaction, one of the most common of which, usually following Habermas's early (1989) analysis, relates to technologically mediated sites. Such sites are important because if free communication is a necessary basis for democracy, the conditions under which that communication takes place are of critical importance. To this end, a number of scholars (Dahlgren, 1993, 1995; Livingston and Lunt, 1994; McNair, 2000; Rosen, 1999) have claimed that media technologies can facilitate public spheres, but others have argued that their integration into a capitalist mode of production stymies this potential (Murdoch, 1982; Golding and Murdoch, 2000; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Wayne, 2003). It has been claimed that more recent technological innovations from digital television to the Internet have improved the mediation of public spheres.

Such claims must be carefully considered in light not of a theory of the public sphere abstracted from context, but of one in which both the medium and the concept are understood in relation to this context. The implications of this contextualisation for the concept have been subject to intense debate (see, for example, Mouffe, 1999), which, due to the political orientation of critical theory, must be engaged. However, while a number of applications of Habermas's theory of the public sphere and of communicative or discourse ethics have considered the communicative context and the influence of communicative distortions (see Blaug, 1997 for an account of these), few of them have considered contradictions in the material context and the material basis of communicative distortion.

Introduction

Some early research in the general area of the Internet and democracy raised such questions as 'does the Internet reinvigorate democracy?', 'will the Internet lead to a new type of democracy?', or 'is the Internet a new public sphere?'. A number of these analyses assigned a high degree of positive agency to the Internet, which is said to 'actually strengthen deliberative democracy' (Gimmler 2001: 31), 'revolutionize the process of political communication', and itself 'invents new forms of democratic activity' (Locke 1999), or acts as an '*inherent* support for democracy' (Simon, Corrales, and Wolfensberger, 2002: 101). Others have argued that the Internet has negative agency, claiming that it will result in moral degradation (Graham 1999), threaten good social relations (Dreyfus 2002), or weaken the 'social glue' required for republican democracy (Sunstein, 2001). As Hill and Hughes put it, 'the bulk of analysts agree that political and societal change are the *effect*, and the Internet is and will be the *cause*' (*sic* Hill & Hughes 1998: 181; emphasis added). For example, Western suggests there will be 'deep, structural, even seismic shifts that will move ... (the USA) away from its traditional reliance on representative democracy toward emerging forms of direct democracy. The current revolution in communications technologies will play a catalytic role' (Western, 2003: 217). This reflects a tendency to assign anthropomorphic attribution of agency to the Internet. Even some studies that have tried to avoid technological determinism have done so by focusing on the uses of the technology whilst downplaying the context of the technology itself, and therefore downplaying the potential for new uses (for example, Polat, 2005).

Such understandings of the effects of the Internet tend to treat it as a somewhat abstract causal factor, and although there has been some very useful critical research on the public sphere and the Internet (Poster, 1997 Bryan, 1998; Kellner, 1998; Hale et al 1999; Malina 1999; Schalken, 2000; Dalhberg, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999, 2002; Saco, 2002; Kolko 2003), the degree with which technologies and their users are fully (i.e. socially, culturally

and economically) grounded varies. Accordingly, research on the Internet and the public sphere tends to be based on questions such as 'Can it promote rational discourse, thus producing the romanticized ideal of a public sphere envisioned by Habermas and others?' and 'is it possible that Internet based technologies will adapt themselves to the current political culture, rather than create a new one' (Papacharissi, 2002: 9-12).

There is, then, a tendency to consider the Internet in abstraction from the full context of use. This latter point can be explicated a little more clearly by drawing on a seminal study of online public spheres. Anthony Wilhelm's (2002) work on 'digital democracy' is one of the most thoroughgoing studies that has drawn on Habermas's work on the public sphere. His study of Usenet/newsgroup[1] discussions concluded that 'online deliberation' is neither thoughtful nor inclusive, and that participants infrequently provide evidence with which to raise and respond to claims. However, though Wilhelm does not take a simplistic view of the technology, his conclusion still seems to be that the Internet is not good for rational debate. There are two related problems with such a conclusion. First, if the Internet is a causal factor in this lack of communicativeness, it would have to be shown that other (non-Internet) forums necessarily provide qualitatively enhanced opportunities. This is to say that it would have to be shown that people are willing and able to engage in rational debate in other settings. Perhaps the problem is not the technology, but the attitudes of the particular people using it. Secondly, if in a certain forum rational debate is not forthcoming, then the problem may consist in the design of that forum rather than the technology as a whole. If people can work to alter a medium and design forums to suit their communicative needs, then perhaps such communicative shortcomings can be addressed.

An additional problem occurs with the lack of conceptual clarification in so much of the work on the Internet, the public sphere and

[1] The terms 'Usenet' and 'newsgroup' refer to the same thing, a text-based email forum in which information can be exchanged by all participants.

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